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Born in 1907, Sir William was educated at Clifton College and Christ's College Cambridge, where he read History and Modern Languages. Entering the Sudan Political Service in 1930, he served in Berber, Darfur, Blue Nile and Equatoria Provinces and finally as Adviser to the Governor-General on Constitutional and External Affairs in the immediate period leading to the Sudan's independence in 1956. He was later able to bring his many talents to other offices.

He was Governor of Aden from 1956 to 1960. From 1961 until 1966 and again from 1970 to 1972 he was intimately connected with the Gulf area, first as Political Resident, based in Bahrain and then recalled from retirement - as the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's Personal Representative for Gulf Affairs.

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**ORGANIZED LABOR AND SOCIAL CHANGE  
IN CONTEMPORARY SUDAN**

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*by*

**Ahmed Sikainga**

*Sir William Luce Fellowship Paper No. 2*

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**Professor Ahmed Sikainga** was the 2000 Sir William Luce Fellow.

## **ORGANIZED LABOR AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY SUDAN<sup>1</sup>**

Based on a lecture given by the 2000 Sir William Luce Fellow

**Professor Ahmad A. Sikainga**

The decade of the 1990s witnessed a remarkable growth in the literature on the process of democratization and the role of civil society in Africa. Most of this literature, however, tends to focus on the role of political parties and human rights groups and paid little attention to workers, peasants, and regional movements despite the fact that these popular constituencies have always provided the social base for the pro-democracy organizations. This was particularly the case of the Sudan, a country that once had one of the best organized and most radical trade union movements in Africa and the Middle East. On two occasions, Sudanese trade unions, professional associations, and other civic organizations led popular uprisings that brought down military regimes: of Ibrahim `Abboud in 1964, and Ja`far Nimeiri in 1985.

This paper focuses on a specific group of Sudanese workers, namely the railway workers of Atbara, who established one of the most dynamic and militant labor movements in Sudanese history. Atbara, headquarters of the Sudan Railways, has attained great notoriety as a distinctive site of labor activism, radical politics, and strong communal bonds.<sup>2</sup>

The past three decades have witnessed the development of a substantial body of research, which transformed African labor history from a neglected field into a vibrant academic enterprise. The works of Richard Sandbrook, Robin Cohen, Richard Jeffries, Paul Lubeck, and others opened up the subject and put it at the center of research on African social history.<sup>3</sup> This early literature naturally reflected the theoretical paradigms of the 1970s and 1980s, which were preoccupied with the process of class formation, proletarianization, trade unions, and labor activism. Influenced by orthodox Marxism, these studies have portrayed the working class as a homogeneous entity whose members shared the same perceptions and aspirations by virtue of their position within the capitalist structure.

In recent years, however, the study of African labor history has been dramatically reshaped by new questions and issues deemed crucial for understanding working class culture, consciousness, and politics. The range of topics has vastly expanded to include working-class family life, leisure, popular culture, gender, and so forth. Beyond the initial focus on predominantly male workers in the formal sector, the study of African labor history has moved to encompass female and casual labor, peasants, petty traders, slaves, and other marginal groups. In other words, there has been growing interest in the history of non-wage workers in the so-called informal sector of the economy. For instance, the works of Charles Van Onselen, Luise White, and several others, have focused on prostitutes, taxi drivers, market women, and domestic servants, and underscored their role in the reproduction of labor.<sup>4</sup>

The new literature has also bridged the gap between labor history and urban history by stressing the interdependence between the urban space and work and by conceptualizing the city as the locus for reproduction of the working class. Indeed, the questions of how and where workers lived and the manner in which they developed neighborhoods and communities are crucial elements for understanding their culture and experience.

Beyond early concern with the role of industrial control, time, and discipline in shaping and molding African workers, considerable attention has now been given to the question of what African workers themselves brought to the workplace. The most pioneering works in this regard have dealt with Southern Africa. For instance, in her study of Zulu mine workers in Natal, Keletso Atkins has shown how Zulu work habits and concepts of time, authority, and discipline permeated the workplace and forced employers to make major adjustments in working conditions.<sup>5</sup> Working-class culture has also figured prominently in Patrick Harries's study on Mozambican migrant workers in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Harries criticized the dominant paradigm in African labor history for its focus on workers' resistance, militancy, and activism. He rejected the notion that working-class culture is shaped solely by the struggle against employers and the capitalist strategy of social control. By focusing on the culture of drunkenness, desertion, and social deviance among Mozambican migrant workers, Harries tried to underscore the wide range of experiences and cultural resources that shaped the worldview of these workers. In short, the emphasis on the cultural matrix represents a major departure from the old paradigms that conceived of working-class politics and consciousness as a mere derivation of socio-economic structure.

Historians of African labor have begun to move away from the confines of the workplace and union halls, to examine workers in their families, neighborhoods, and communities. Among the most important aspects of African workers' experience are leisure and social activities. This was the subject of Phyllis Martin's book, in which she explored recreational activities such as football, music, dance, and fashion among urban residents in colonial Brazzaville.<sup>7</sup> Martin's study illustrated the manner in which these activities fostered development of strong social networks and emergence of particular identities among the African population of this colonial town. According to Martin, leisure activities were "arenas of contest and mediation within European and African sub-communities as well as between them."

The questions of gender and the impact of wage labor on household structure and family life have attracted considerable attention in recent years. Lisa Lindsay's study on Yoruba railway workers in Ibadan focused on the impact of wage labor and post-World War II colonial labor policies on household structure and family life among Yoruba railway workers.<sup>8</sup> As several scholars have pointed out, the post-war labor reforms aimed at the creation of a more stable and differentiated working class, through the provision of family wages, decent housing, and social services. According to Lindsay, these policies were premised on the European conception of the male worker as head of the household and primary breadwinner. Application of these concepts in the African context had serious implications for gender relations and domestic life. Lindsay argued



that the notion of the male worker as breadwinner conflicted with a Yoruba social structure in which women engaged in various commercial activities and enjoyed a considerable degree of economic independence. The promotion of the model of the male-headed nuclear family and the emphasis on female domesticity formed the central theme of Thomas Klubock's recent book on Chilean copper miners.<sup>9</sup> Klubock's study showed how the North American mining companies relentlessly sought to organize gender relations to conform to this model. In short, the new literature has not only shown the need for a more expansive working-class history, but it has also underscored the importance of examining the history of African workers in different regional and cultural contexts. Such an approach would illuminate not only the myriad factors that shaped workers' consciousness and behavior, but also the different ways in which they constructed their identity and expressed their consciousness.

Of particular relevance to this book is the literature on transportation workers, especially dock and railway workers. The studies of Ralph Grillo, Richard Jefferies, Timothy Oberst, Frederick Cooper, and others have attributed the high level of militancy of transport workers to a number of factors.<sup>10</sup> Railroads and harbors had been a major source of revenue for both colonial and post-colonial governments and played pivotal economic and social roles. The sheer size of railway workers and their strategic position in the colonial economy allowed them to exert considerable influence. Moreover, railway workers represented the most stable, homogenous group of African workers, who embraced the ethos of railway employment and developed a strong sense of community and corporate identity.

It is important at this point to ask what is the significance of the experience of the railway workers of Atbara within and beyond the context of African labor history? To what extent did the experience of these workers resemble or differ from other Sudanese, African, and Middle Eastern workers? And what was unique about the world the railway workers of Atbara made?

This paper contends that the experience of each group of workers, their culture, identity, and the way in which they conceptualized their struggle and organized themselves were shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts.

Within the Sudanese context, the railway workers were distinguished by their sheer size, stability, skills, and their pioneering role in the development of the Sudanese labor movement. Unlike casual laborers who moved between wage and non-wage employment, the majority of the railway workers were permanent employees who spent the greater part of their lives in the city. They created a multifaceted world that reflected their rural background and their railway experience. To face the challenges of urban life, Atbara workers established extensive social networks, exemplified by regional associations, mutual aid institutions, and cooperative societies. Through their persistent struggles and confrontations with the colonial and postcolonial Sudanese governments, the railway workers of Atbara created a "culture of protest" that was drawn upon by successive generations of workers. This culture of protest became the defining characteristic of Atbara.

Beyond the Sudanese context, the experience of the railway workers of Atbara illuminates a number of themes that have much wider implications for African and Middle Eastern labor history. In many parts of Africa and the Middle East, the labor movement established close links with either politically moderate nationalist movements or leftist organizations that espoused some populist ideologies. In the Sudanese case, however, since its inception in the late 1940s, the railway workers movement had been closely associated with a Marxist-Leninist party, namely the (SCP). Until the party's destruction in 1971 in the aftermath of an abortive coup, the SCP was considered the largest and the most influential communist party in Africa and the Middle East, second only to the South African Communist Party. Through its mobilization of workers, peasants, students, professionals, and other groups the SCP built a powerful popular movement that played a pivotal role in Sudanese politics.

The link between the labor movement and the SCP raises important points. In the first place, it defies the essentialist notions that Muslim societies can only be understood through the prism of religion. With the exception of a few studies, little attention was given to the experiences of the left in Muslim societies, the struggle between Islam and secularism, its link with working class history and politics. For instance, Paul Lubeck's study of the labor movement in the city of Kano in Northern Nigeria showed both the success and the limitations of Islamic social populism that was embraced by this group of Muslim workers. According to Lubeck, Kano workers developed an oppositional ideology within an Islamic framework to express their nationalist sentiments against European colonial rule and to resist their social and economic subordination in the post-colonial period. Similarly, in his study of Iranian workers, Assef Bayat argued that following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 Islam had become "a key element in workers' subjectivity."<sup>11</sup> Iranian industrial workers used Islamic ideology to express their occupational grievances and class interest. However, Bayat also stressed the complex and contradictory role of Islam in articulating class-consciousness. Bayat contends that while Islam served as an ideology and a discourse to express common needs, it also contributed to exclusivism and blurring of class lines.

The success of the SCP in establishing a strong base among Sudanese workers and peasants, the overwhelming majority of whom are Muslims, is often attributed to a number of factors. Prominent among those was the 'flexible' attitude of the party towards ideology and Islam. In its pronouncements, the SCP did not oppose Islam and emphasized that there is no contradiction between individual religious beliefs and communism. However, the SCP rejected the political role of the two dominant Islamic sects in the Sudan: the Khatimiyya and the Mahdiyya. From the SCP's perspective, the political parties that were affiliated with these sects represented the interest of privilege elite who exploited the loyalties of their followers. This paper argues that one of major factors behind the success of the SCP in mobilizing these groups was its ability to organize at the grass roots level and to develop dynamic and dedicated union leaders who enjoyed considerable respect and loyalty among the rank and file. What has not been discussed, however, is the complex nature of this alliance as well as workers' perspective and strategy. While the SCP was successful in mobilizing railway workers around occupational demands, it had great difficulty in getting their support for its broad political

program. Railway workers continued to express their sectarian loyalties in national politics. Their behavior mirrors the complex way in which culture shapes and transforms working class politics and underscores the limitations of the proletarianization paradigm.

The experience of Atbara's railway workers also illustrates the critical role of institutions such as labor unions, political parties, and the state in shaping working class history. Although the new literature on labor history has drawn our attention to the importance of such elements as culture, community, family life, and gender in understanding of the workers' experience, the role of institutions should not be ignored. Bill Freund noted, in many parts of Africa trade unions were turned into undemocratic institutions and became mere "power brokers" between workers and the state. Union leaders were often co-opted by governments and used their positions to gain material and political benefits. However, in the case of Atbara, the railway workers transformed their union from an organization of collective bargaining into a dynamic institution that played a pivotal role in the social, cultural, and political life of the city and the whole country. Since its formation in the late 1940s, the SRWU created an organizational structure and a system of elections that fostered the emergence of leadership from the grassroots level and allowed unskilled workers to rise to the highest positions. The SRWU organized literacy programs among workers, built schools and clinics, and engaged in various forms of charitable activities. Over the years, the SRWU became an integral part of the social fabric of Atbara.

The experience of Atbara workers also counteracts the labor aristocracy thesis, which portrayed artisans as a privileged group of workers whose primary concern was to preserve their entitlements and advantageous positions. According to this thesis, skilled workers tend to be unreceptive to appeals for solidarity with the lower strata of the working class. However, numerous studies have shown that artisans in Africa and the Middle East can hardly be considered an elite group. Skilled and unskilled workers lived in the same neighborhoods, engaged in similar activities, and were viewed as the same by their societies.

Atbara was not just a working class town, but also a major center of literary and social activities and a prominent site of modernity within the Sudanese context. The city took the lead in the establishment of soccer clubs in the Sudan and had the oldest soccer stadium in the country. Moreover, the Atbarawis engaged in various forms of literary activities that ranged from poetry and drama to cinema. Many of the railway workers such as al-Hajj `Abd al-Rahman, al-Tayyib Hasan al-Tayyib, and Hashim al-Sa'id were accomplished poets, whose poetry not only celebrated workers' struggle and the militant character of Atbara, but also expressed romantic themes. It is worth mentioning that it was in Atbara that the first Sudanese film (*Hopes and Dreams*) was produced, in which al-Tayyib Hassan al-Tayyib, the prominent labor activist, was the leading role. These creative writings not only reveal the various ways in which workers perceived their struggle and expressed their identity, but also allow us to see these workers as intellectuals in their own right.

The tradition of labor militancy that characterized Atbara was a product of daily struggles inside and outside the work place. These workers, most of whom were rural immigrants, were integrated into a modern, industrial establishment with a highly regimented system of authority, and a work culture that fostered a strong sense of community and camaraderie. Association with the railway industry, which played a crucial role in Sudan's economic and social life, had a profound impact on workers' perspective and self-image. From the time the first tracks were laid, the railroad has occupied a crucial place in Sudan's historical imagination. In a country of great distances and poor communications, dependent on revenue from export, the railways played a key role. Atbara railway workers exhibited an acute awareness of their pivotal role in Sudan's economy and their status as industrial workers in a country where the vast majority of the population engaged in farming and pastoral activities.

### The Establishment of the Railway System in the Sudan.

The establishment of the railway network in the Sudan dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was closely linked with the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of the Sudan in the late 1890s. Following the defeat of the Mahdist state, the railway system gradually expanded to different parts of the country. By 1960s, the Sudan railway system had about 2,956 miles, the largest single system in tropical Africa. By World War II, the Sudan Railways was the largest employer of industrial labor in the country, with about 26,000 employees, half of whom were stationed in Atbara.<sup>12</sup>

Atbara was chosen as the headquarters of the Sudan Railways in 1906, mainly because of its location at the juncture of two major lines: Khartoum Wadi Halfa line and Port Sudan-Nile line. Prior to that, it was nothing more than a military camp near where a major battle was fought between the Anglo-Egyptian army and the Mahdist forces. This battle known as the Battle of the Atbara was described in great details in Winston Churchill's *The River War*. Within a few years, Fort Atbara was transformed into a bustling and cosmopolitan railway center with a population that included Britons, Greeks, Italians, Eastern Europeans, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Indians, and Middle Easterners.

### **The Railway Labor Force**

Until the 1930s, the overwhelming majority of the Sudan Railways were foreigners. While British Royal Engineers and other Europeans formed the bulk of the skilled labor force, the Egyptian Army Railway Battalion did most of the work on the main line and in the workshops in Atbara. In other words, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Sudan Railways was essentially a military institution. However, for economic and political reasons, the Egyptian Army Railway Battalion was evacuated from the Sudan in 1924, a move that paved the way for the development of a Sudanese railway work force.

By the late 1940s, Atbara had a population of about 40,000 people, most of whom had come from the Northern region, which was inhabited by various ethnic groups such as Nubians as well as Arabic speaking Shaiqiyya, Ja`aliyyin, and Rubatab. The northern region has an ancient history. It was in this area that the Nubian kingdom of Meroe had flourished. After the collapse of Meroe, three Christian kingdoms dominated this area until for several centuries. However, the Arab/Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and their gradual migration and settlement in Nubia, Christianity declined and Islam became the dominant religion in the area. The overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the northern region were farmers. However, because of shortage of arable land, for several centuries this region has witnessed outward migration to other parts of the Sudan.

The transformation of rural immigrants into industrial workers is a subject of great significance. The bulk of the early literature on African labor history was preoccupied with the process of proletarianization, which was premised on the notion that the transition from farmers to workers represented successive stages in an evolutionary process. According to this thesis, as in nineteenth century Europe, the industrial environment in which African immigrants worked would inevitably lead them to abandon their rural work habits, adopt the industrial discipline and work culture, develop class-consciousness, and engage in collective action against employers. However, the trajectory of African workers of rural origins was much more complex than this linear process. As recent studies have shown, African workers brought to the work place a great deal of their rural culture, attitudes, and work habits. Like Russian peasants who joined the industrial work force during the 1930s, African workers remained neither archetypal farmer nor did they become the ideal workers employers had endeavored to create. They developed a vision and created a new identity that reflected both their work experience and their rural background.

### **Social Networks and Corporate Identity**

As mentioned earlier, the unique nature of railway employment played a major role in shaping workers' attitudes and in fostering a strong sense of solidarity among them. In many respects, railway employment resembled military service. Both institutions have complex hierarchies, chains of command, strict rules, and a high level of discipline. As in the case of military service, railway corporations made considerable efforts to mold their employees and inculcate in them an ethos of obedience, loyalty, and solidarity.

As in Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, and elsewhere the railway workers in Atbara developed a deep sense of corporate identity. They used workplace connections as a basis for social interaction in the community. Workers from the same division often attended the same club, café, and restaurant. Moreover, railway divisions became major sites for political mobilization, particularly during the labor uprisings in the 1940s. These workers brought to the workplace many aspects of their rural culture and social organization. The most conspicuous of those were village networks. Typically the early generation of workers

who had established themselves in the town, played a major role in helping new comers from their home areas. In addition to providing shelter and guidance, early workers helped their relatives and fellow villagers find employment. The existence of village networks in Atbara became a major incentive for many people in the northern region to migrate to the town. According to oral accounts, there was a popular belief among the region's inhabitants that any newcomer in Atbara would easily find a relative or a fellow villager who would guide him and help him find a job.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of Sudanese railway workers on the workplace can also be seen in the unique railway vocabulary they developed. The vast majority of these workers spoke their native Sudanese languages. However, their job involved handling thousands of items and learning a wide variety of names and terminologies that came from European languages. Over the years, railway workers created a unique vocabulary that blended Sudanese colloquial Arabic with European terminologies.

The terms that were used daily in workshops, dockyards, and steamers had diverse origins that included ancient Nubian, Middle Eastern, European, and Turkish languages. For instance, the word *sandal* (barge) had a Byzantine-Greek origin; *qarina* (keel) was borrowed from Latin. Similarly, the word *wardiya* (turn of duty) was from Venetian Italian *guardia*. While the marine vocabulary was ancient, railway terms came mainly from European vocabulary for the steam engine. Some terms were introduced first in Egypt by Maltese artisans who worked in the British naval dockyard in Malta. Maltese artisans taught them to their Egyptian counterparts while working on the Suez Canal. Many of these Egyptian artisans served in the SR. Italian terms can be seen in terms such as *kumsari* from *commissario* (ticket collector) and *farmala* from *fermola* (vehicle break). Similarly, the permanent way head gang was *hikimdar*, a Turkish military title introduced by the Egyptians. Other innovations were the titles *mahwalji* for switchman and *'atashqi* for charge man.<sup>14</sup> Over the years, this language has become deeply rooted in Atbara to the extent that even city residents who were not associated with the railway department have become familiar with it.

The attitude of the railway workers was also shaped by their experience outside the work place. In order to face the challenges of city life and wage employment, these workers drew upon useful elements of their rural culture. They created extensive social networks that included mutual aid societies, regional and ethnic associations, and social and sport clubs. Of all Sudanese towns, Atbara had the largest concentration of mutual aid, charity, and village associations and has become known for its strong social bonds and communal solidarity.

The formation of voluntary associations and clubs reflected the development of an urban identity that had multiple dimensions. Although these institutions were organized on the basis of village, ethnic, and communal links, they also encourage values that had industrial functions such as time consciousness, saving, thrift and hard work.

Social and sport clubs also became main avenues for leisure activities. One of the most important recreational activities in Atbara was football or soccer. As mentioned earlier

the city had the oldest soccer stadium in the Sudan, built in 1927. The literature on leisure activities in colonial Africa has stressed the fact that leisure activities were closely linked with the official attempt to inculcate in African workers and urban residents with industrial concepts of time and discipline. But as was often the case, colonized people reshaped and refashioned these new forms of recreation to suit their own needs. In the case of Atbara, the railway department encouraged sport activities among its employees. The department organized regular soccer tournaments among its various divisions such as engineering, mechanical, etc. These tournaments were considered as important tools for molding railway employees and helping them internalize the norms of the industry. According to a British official,

These inter-departmental meetings will re-act in no uncertain manner an office and workshop, and it is by such means that we can best foster and maintain that ideal of which we are all proud: the Atbara spirit.<sup>15</sup>

In many parts of Africa, sport fields became arenas where European colonizers and their African subjects mixed. As Laura Fair has observed in her recent book on football in Zanzibar, this interaction created a sense of equality and “symbolically undermined colonial hierarchies that place Europeans at the top of the racial scale.”<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that British members of the Atbara sport clubs could not tolerate sharing their field with Sudanese and Egyptian players and demanded the railway department to either build a separate field for them or abolish these tournaments. It was for this reason that the Atbara stadium was built in 1927.

The organization of social and sport clubs reflected existing social patterns in the city. Clubs became important symbols of communal identities and provided avenues for the expression of neighborhood, ethnic, and occupational loyalties. However, these clubs were exclusively male and provided spaces in which male workers interacted in the public sphere and provided them with avenues to socialize and develop lifetime friendships. Clubs also became sites for political mobilization, particularly during the nationalist struggle in the late 1940s.

Football generated great excitement among Atbara residents. Each team had a hard core of dedicated fans who cheered it during matches and paraded the streets when it won. Football gave individuals from poor and socially marginal backgrounds an opportunity to achieve social status and fame. It was in this dense web of networks and social activities that workers formulate conceptions of social identity and tried to tame the city and make it a hospitable place. These traditions and social practices also became useful resources in workers’ struggle for better working conditions.

From the beginning the railway workers of Atbara engaged in various forms of covert and overt protests. Strikes actions occurred in the early 1920s and in the 1930s by various groups of workers. But these were sporadic and were limited to small groups of workers. However, it was the World War II era that can be considered as a turning point in the history of labor protests not only in the Sudan but throughout the continent.

## **World War II and its Impact**

The war period represented a watershed in the history of labor movements in Africa. In the pre-war era, European colonial powers were mainly concerned with the questions of how many African workers they could obtain and how much labor they could extract from them. Moreover, prior to the war European colonial powers conceived of African worker as a temporary wage earner at the risk of becoming “detrified” if allowed staying too long from his village. However, after the war, European colonial officials embraced a new vision of the African as industrial man, now living with a wife and family in a setting conducive to acculturating new generations into modern society. They began to reproduce in Africa the legal and administrative institutions used to manage labor problems in France, England, and Europe, with the hope of creating a more acculturated, experienced, and productive labor force.<sup>17</sup>

This new strategy was a direct response to the wave of strikes and labor uprisings that occurred in different parts of the continent. Strikes took place in the copper mines of northern Rhodesia in 1935 and spread throughout the mines through religious organizations, dance societies, personal networks, and mass gatherings. The intensification of strikes action during the war years was a direct result to the harsh economic conditions that faced many African workers. During the war years, colonial powers, particularly Britain and France, became heavily dependent on African resources. As demands for food and cash crops increased, these powers imposed conscripted labor on African rural producers, prompting many to migrate to the cities. Rapid urban growth created serious strains on living conditions. At the same time growing inflation made wages inadequate. These conditions produced large-scale labor unrest and riots that posed a serious threat to colonial authorities. In this regard, transportation workers specially dock and railway workers took the lead in organizing labor protest. In East Africa, the port city of Mombassa was the scene of intense labor uprisings in 1939, 1942, and 1945. Similar protest occurred in Nigeria in 1942, 1945, and 1949; in the Gold Coast in 1947 and 1948; and in Tanganyika in 1947. In French West Africa, the railway workers of Dakar, the leading port in the region, launched a two month long strike that shut down the harbor and crippled the transportation system in the whole area.

In view of its strategic location, the Sudan had become involved in the war in a major way. The Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1935 brought the country into direct confrontation with the Axis powers. The Sudan became a supply center for the Allies forces in North Africa and the Middle East. The Sudan Railways in particular played a vital role in the war efforts. It carried about 80,000 troops and 100,000 tons of military equipment between Sudanese ports and Eritrea. The railway workshops in Atbara built coach bodies and various types of wagons and even aircraft components and some military equipment. It is not surprising that the Sudan had become a major target of



the Italians, whose primary goal was to cut off the supply for the Allies forces. On July 4, 1940 the Italian troops occupied the town of Kassala in the eastern part of the Sudan and during the next three months launched major air raids on various Sudanese towns. Atbara itself was raided three times, causing major panic among the city's residents and forcing them to flee. It was only towards the end of 1940 that the British were able to mount an offensive forcing the Italians to evacuate Kassala and other towns. In January 1941, Emperor Haile Selassie returned to Ethiopia from exile in the Sudan.<sup>18</sup>

As elsewhere in Africa, the post-war period in the Sudan witnessed growing labor. It was the railway workers of Atbara who spearheaded these protests. These artisans began to organize themselves since the late 1930s. In 1938, the graduates of the Atbara technical school, the only school that provided technical training, formed a society called The Old Boys of Technical School club. The society engaged in various types of cultural and social activities such theatre, reading poetry, and had a soccer team. Railway artisans resented the manner in which the railway management favored foreign artisans in terms of pay and benefits as well as colonial racism.

After a series of failed strikes in early 1940s, the artisans recognized the need for collective action. In 1946, the old Boys of Technical School formed the Workers' Affairs Association (WAA) and demanded the railway management to recognize it as the sole representative of the railway workers. At the time, the Anglo-Egyptian administration was in the process of formulating a labor policy and to consider the question of labor unions. In 1945, the government established a Labor Board to deal with these issues. After studying several sections of the British Ministry of Labor Industrial Relations Handbook, the labor board concluded that the Sudan was certainly not ready for trade unions. Instead, the board suggested the formation of Workers Committees (joint labor-management consultative councils). The formation of these committees was totally opposed by the Workers Affairs Associations that demanded its recognition as the mouthpiece of the workers.<sup>19</sup>

### **The 1947-48 Strikes**

After sending a series of petitions to the railway management, the WWA decided to lead a peaceful march on 12 July 1947, to the railway headquarters in protest of the management refusal to accept their demands and to show that it had the backing of the workers. The march, in which four thousands railway workers participated, was well organized and peaceful. When the marchers reached the railway headquarters, they were confronted by armed police. The workers insisted on submitting a memorandum to the general manager of the railways. Several attempts by the district authorities to persuade the WAA leaders to disperse the march and let the president of the association submit the memorandum had failed. The WAA leaders insisted on presenting it before the whole workers to show the management that they had the full support. Violence broke between

the police and the crowd, and in the ensuing chaos hundreds of people were injured. A strike was announced immediately. The news of the strike spread rapidly throughout the railway network the whole system was shut down. The strike was ended on July 23 after mediation of prominent nationalist politicians. The Workers Affairs Association was recognized by the management as the sole representative of the railway workers.

The strike of July 1947 was a remarkable historical event that has been engraved in the memory of the railway workers. Those who participated still remember it with great pride and valor. The genuine support of the local communities had transformed the strike into a truly popular movement and showed how the workers were well integrated into these communities. In his memoirs, Al-Tayyib Hasan described the cheers and the encouragement they received from the people of al-Damer when they were transferred to the provincial prison on July 12, 1947. Upon their arrival in prison, they were cheered and given tobacco by inmates who were serving time there. Al-Tayyib told the story of an inmate from the Batahin tribe, who was imprisoned for stealing a camel. He told them that since he did not have any thing to offer, he could entertain them by singing for them. Indeed, the Batahin were known throughout the Sudan as excellent *dobait* singers. According to Al-Tayyib, the man continued to entrain them until the early morning hours. Private Citizens got permission from the prison authorities to provide the detainees with food and tobacco.<sup>20</sup>

Many communities in Atbara and the neighboring villages continued to send donations, prompting the district commissioner to summon the merchants to his office and threatened to punish them if they continued to support the workers. Two days before the strike shops were not opened until 10 a.m., causing the authorities to dub it as the “shop keepers strike.” Indeed, the merchants themselves had several grievances, for many of them were convicted under the government price regulations.<sup>21</sup>

The success of the July strike and the recognition of the WAA gave the workers a sense of empowerment and led to further militancy. Following its recognition, the WAA then began to push its agenda that included a general increase in wages, reduction and limitation of hours of work, housing, and traveling privileges. The next several months witnessed intense negotiations between railway management and the WAA. Despite the management admission of the difficult working conditions and the low pay, it considered the WAA proposals on wages and the reduction of working hours as extravagant. The WAA became frustrated in the face of the government evasion and decided to call a token strike for 26-28 January 1948. The WAA sent a letter to the governor-general with copies to the prime minister of Britain and Egypt, explaining the reasons for the strike and threatening to take further actions if their demands were not met. The strike was successful and shut down the whole system.

However, unlike the previous ones, the strike of 1948 was much longer in duration, and thus more difficult to sustain. Its success may be attributed to the dedication of the workers themselves as well as the support they received both locally and externally. One of the main difficulties was the provision of supplies such as food and water to workers in the outside stations. The WAA organized regular train services to carry supplies to these

districts. As these services could not meet the demand, the WAA received critical support from private citizens. A local businessman put all his trucks at the WAA's disposal, while the `Ababda nomads volunteered with their camels to carry supplies. Similarly, the Dabora family, which owned a well-known bookstore in Atbara, supplied vegetables. Strike organizers set up committees in other towns to receive contributions and to provide help to workers' families in these districts.

The WAA directed its attention to the issue of tuition payment of workers' children who attended private schools. But since its funds could not meet these costs, some of the members of the executive committee, including the president, used their houses as collateral and borrowed the money from prominent merchants. The WAA then bought grain, which was given to various departmental committees who would then distribute it to the workers.

In the meantime, steady stream of donations was coming from the various communities in Atbara. Merchants, non-wage workers, and farmers from the neighboring villages gave generously both in cash and in kind. Of particular significance was the contribution of women working in the informal sector such as traders, beer brewers, and other activities. A woman gave the strike organizers the title of her house until she could find the money. The wife of nationalist leader and later Prime Minister, Isma`il al-Azhari contributed twenty-one pieces of gold.

Donations also came from abroad. The Egyptian trade unions contributed three thousands Egyptian pounds, the union of Sudanese residents in Cairo provided ninety-one pounds and an anonymous Egyptian citizen gave one thousand pounds. Among the most important results of the strikes of 1947 and 1948, a series of legislation were drafted and became a law during the subsequent years. These legislations dealt with conditions of employment as well as the formation and registration of trade unions. They included the Trade Union Ordinance, Workmen's Compensation Ordinance, Workshops and Factories Ordinance; the Wages Tribunal Ordinance; and the Employment Exchange Ordinance, 1955, just to name a few.

It is worth mentioning, however, that these legislations were similar to those introduced in British colonies in East and West Africa. Indeed, they were all based on the British model of industrial relations, which were designed to keep labor disputes within "legal" boundaries and to discourage the politicization of workers unions. The Trade Union Ordinance required compulsory registration of unions and put several restrictions on the freedom of government employees to join associations. For instance, a government employee was prohibited from joining a union not catering exclusively for such employees. The ordinance also segregated unions by making it illegal for unions of government employees to federate with other non-government unions. The WAA was into the Sudan Railways Workers' Union in 1950.

One of the most intriguing aspects of these negotiations was the way in which wages were linked to household arrangements and marital status. Representative of the railway workers insisted on the provision of family. Commenting on the 1945 strike of the

railway workers in Nigeria, Lisa Lindsay noted that this strike entailed a crucial irony: male workers demanded wage increases and even family allowances on the basis of their status as breadwinners, yet they survived during the course of the strike in large measure because of the economic independence of their wives and the importance of market women to local economies. The concept of the male breadwinner in the Sudan is deeply entrenched and was rationalized by Islamic precepts and practices.

The question of wages and how they were spent is a subject of multiple dimensions and it embraced both rural and urban contexts. Colonial officials insisted that wages should be linked to the labor market and productivity. But for workers, wages represented much more than that. In addition to maintaining households, workers from rural areas had several other obligations. They were expected to provide financial help to their parents and relatives. Sending monthly remittance to the parents was an important obligation. Failure to fulfill it would seriously damage the person's social standing both within his immediate family and the community at large. The importance of this remittance was expressed in songs, poetry, proverbs, and was an integral part of the popular culture in the northern region. Moreover, urban workers were expected to give gifts to relatives and neighbors when they visit as well as on other religious and social occasions. In short, contrary to the views of colonial officials, to these workers the purpose of earning cash was not merely to subsist but to fulfill several obligations.

### **Leadership, Ideology and the Politics of Trade Unions**

One of the most important aspects of the history of the labor movement in the Sudan was its close links with the Sudanese left, particularly the Sudanese Communist Party. The influence of Marxist ideas, particularly among the railway workers can be traced further back to the early 1920s. Many of Eastern and Central European artisans employed by the Sudan Railways at Atbara had Communist leanings. One of the many societies that existed in Atbara in the 1930s, was called the Hammer and Sickle Society. According to official reports, this society was formed by a group of discontented junior officials who wished to have the right to form trade unions. However, the activities of these individuals and the extent to which they tried to recruit Sudanese workers are unclear.

The SCP was founded in 1946 by a group of Sudanese students who had studied in Egypt. But due to open hostility of the British colonial administration and the Muslim establishment, the party had to live under the guise of the Sudanese Movement for National Liberation. It changed the name to the Sudanese Communist Party in 1949.<sup>22</sup> Since its inception, the SCP was heavily involved in organizing workers and managed to recruit a number of prominent labor leaders such as al-Shafi` Ahmad al-Shaykh, who held the position of the secretary of the World Federation of Trade Unions in the 1950s. With the help of the SCP, the workers created an umbrella organization called, Sudanese Workers Trade Union Federation, in which over 60 trade unions were represented.

The SCP devoted great attention and efforts to Atbara, to which it sent its best cadres. Of all the SCP's branches, the one in Atbara was the best organized and had the most

dynamic leaders. Recruitment of workers went through several phases. It was based largely on personal connections. Typically, the potential candidate would be given a copy of the SCP magazine (the Red Flag) to read. This would be followed by a discussion of the main topics in the magazine. If found suitable, the candidate would then be nominated for the SCP membership by a party member. At the initial phase, the new recruit would go through a probationary period, during which he would read the internal bylaws and rules of the SCP and be given light tasks such as distributing leaflets and so forth. At the end of the probationary period, he would then become a full member of the SCP. In addition to the workplace, the communists were active in social and sport clubs. They translated literary works from European languages and organized cultural events in various clubs in the city.

Despite the success of the SCP in establishing a strong base among the railway workers, it had great difficulty in steering the railway workers movement towards its broad political agenda. While railway workers elected communists to the SRWU leadership, they often voted for sectarian candidates in national elections. From the perspective of the SCP, workers' voting pattern reflected the absence of a true "class consciousness."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the party's view reflected its theoretical framework, which conceptualized the working class mainly in terms of its location in the socio-economic structure and presumed that a "truly" proletarian consciousness is essentially "secular" and "socialist." But workers' attitude underscores the complex ways in which non-class elements shaped and transformed workers attitude and politics, The prevalence of religious and sectarian loyalties among workers was not intrinsic to the railway workers of Atbara but existed in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies. It is important to point out that when the railway workers elected communists to their union and voted for sectarian candidates in national elections, they were not necessarily making a choice between "secularism" and religion. Workers' voting pattern had a lot to do with their strategies and goals. To understand the attitude of the railway workers of Atbara, a number of factors have to be taken into account. Election of communists to the union leadership was motivated mainly by workers' desire to improve their conditions. Based on their long experience, the railway workers came to believe that communist trade union leaders were better organized and more efficient in achieving their goals. As Hashim al-Sa'id put it, "we were few in numbers and had little resources in comparison with sectarian candidates. But we were more persuasive and better organized." According to al-Hajj `Abd al-Rahman,

Workers came to associate communists with strikes and uprisings. When they had pressing demands, they elected communists. But strikes were usually costly and sometimes workers wanted to avoid them, in which case they would elect non-communist elements.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, most workers were preoccupied with daily survival strategies and occupational concerns, and were often oblivious to larger political issues. Despite their affiliation with the SCP, some trade union leaders such as al-Hajj, al-Shafi` firmly believed that labor unions were democratic institutions and should remain independent

from party politics. For instance, when in 1968 al-Hajj was elected to represent his constituency in the national parliament in Khartoum, he won because of his popularity as a charismatic trade union leader.

As in many parts of Africa, the labor movement faced systematic repression by the post colonial regimes. For the most part, nationalist movements in Africa brought to power authoritarian regimes that vigorously sought greater control over social movements and independent organizations. These regimes were particularly threatened by the militancy and the assertiveness of trade unions. In single party states such as Ghana under Nkrumah, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, trade unions became mere powerbrokers between the state and the working class. Moreover, African states adopted the slogan of development and expected workers to sacrifice their occupational demands for the sake of nation building and economic progress.

During the post-independence period, the Sudan vacillated between military and civilian rule. Of the forty seven years since independence, the country spent 32 years under military regimes. Both civilian and military regimes sought to co-opt the labor movement, but the repression was particularly severe under military dictatorships. Nonetheless, building on their combative tradition of the 1940s, Sudanese labor unions, particularly the railway workers union, remained resilient and became the focus of popular resistance against authoritarian regime. Under the first military regime of General Abboud, they formed the core of a broad front that included professional associations and other civic organizations. In October 1964, the front organized a campaign of civil disobedience and a general strike which forced the junta to step down and restored parliamentary rule. However, parliamentary rule did not last long. In 1969 the civilian government was overthrown by general Ja`far Nimeiri who established one of the most repressive regimes in modern Sudanese history. Nimeiri's policies had a huge impact on the labor movement. During the first two years, Nimeiri's regime had a close alliance with some faction of the SCP. But from the perspective of the bulk of the SCP, Nimeiri's regime was nothing more than a military coup and continued to oppose it. Matters came to a head in July 1971, when a group of army officers who were sympathetic to the SCP staged a coup, but failed to hold power for more than three days. After returning to power, Nimeiri took this opportunity to crush the SCP. Three of the party leaders, including `Abd al-Khaliq Mahjoub, its secretary general were executed. Al-Shafi Ahmad al-Shaykh the secretary general of the Federation and scores of SCP members were court martial and executed. For the next ten years, the railway workers of Atbara became the primary target of Nimeiri, who was determined to end once and for all their political. To a large extent, Nimeiri succeeded in achieving his goals. In addition to systematic purge of labor activists, Nimeiri decentralized the Sudan railways thereby minimizing Atbara's importance as a place that had a large concentration of workers. Reorganization and neglect led to rapid decline of the railway system. Coupled with this the regimes emphasis on building paved roads. The final show occurred in 1981 when the railway workers staged a lengthy strike, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the regime. Thousands of workers were dismissed and the railway corporation was completely decentralized. The headquarters were moved from Atbara to Khartoum and a number of regional headquarters were created. But, the final blow to the railway workers movement

occurred under the current Sudanese government. In addition to dismissing and detaining trade union activists, the government dismissed thousands of railway workers in the early 1990s. Moreover, major steps were taken to privatize the railway department.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the decline of their movement, the railway workers of Atbara have created an enduring legacy and can be considered as one of the principal makers of contemporary Sudan. These workers inaugurated a powerful social movement and developed many innovative ways and sophisticated strategies that became a model for resisting authoritarian regime. They established a tradition of militancy and a culture of protest that was drawn upon by successive generations of Sudanese labor organizers, civic leaders, and political activists.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of the Sudanese railway workers of Atbara, see Ahmad Sikainga, City of Steel and Fire: A social history of Atbara, Sudan's Railway Town, 1906-1984 (Heinemann, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds., The Development of an African Working Class (London: Longman, 1975); Jeff Crisp, The Story of an African Working Class: Ghanaian Miners' Struggle, 1870-1980 (London: Zed Books, 1984); Paul Lubeck, Islam and Urban Labor in Nigeria: The Making of a Muslim Working Class (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). Richard Jeffries, Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). For an overview of the main works and issues in the field of African labor history, see Bill Freund, The African Worker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Van Onselen, New Babylon: Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914 (London: Longman, 1982); Claire Robertson, Sharing the Same Bowl? A Socioeconomic History of Women and Class in Accra, Ghana (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984); Luise White, The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Keletso Atkins, The Moon is Dead! Give Us Our Money! Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethics, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Harries, Work, Culture, and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa, 1860-1910 (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis M. Martin, Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> Lisa Lindsay, "Putting the Family on Track: Gender and Domestic Life on the Colonial Nigerian Railway," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Miller Klubock, Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904-1951 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> R.D. Grillo, African Railwaymen: Solidarity and Opposition in an East African Labor Force (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); Richard Jeffries, Class, Power and Ideology; Fredrick Cooper, On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombassa (New Haven: Yale University Press,



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<sup>11</sup> Assef Bayat, "Historiography, Class, Iranian Workers," in Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies, ed. Zachary Lockman (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 202.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Hill, Sudan Transport (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 55.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Musa Mitay, Atbara, 12 October 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Hill, Sudan Transport, 157.

<sup>15</sup> Atbarabian, vol. 1, July 1927, p. 12

<sup>16</sup> Laura Fair, Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2001), 236.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Cooper, Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> M.W. Daly, Imperial Sudan: The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, 1934-1956 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 130-31.

<sup>19</sup> On these developments see, Saad ed Din Fawzi, The Labor Movement in the Sudan, 1946-1955 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

<sup>20</sup> Al-Tayyib Hasan al-Tayyib, Mudhakirat `an al-Harka al-Ummaliyya (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1989) 5-7.

<sup>21</sup> N.R.O. NP 2/7/693: Sudan Railways, Workers' Affairs Association, July 1947.

<sup>22</sup> For a history of the SCP, see Mohammed Nuri El-Amin, "The Sudanese Communist Movement, Part 1" Middle East Studies 32 (July 1996): 22-40; Part 2, Middle East Studies, 32 (October 1996): 251-63.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Al-Hajj `Abd al-Rahman, Khartoum, 23 August 1995.